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ABSTRACT

The development of empathy, sympathy, and consideration for others ranks as an important ingredient of social education in schools. To get across to children with deficient empathy and sympathy, knowledge about their psychological mechanisms is necessary. A project on "Psychological Mechanisms in Children with Deficient Empathy and Sympathy" was elaborated to contribute to that kind of knowledge. The work of the project, however, will also entail a development of methods. The techniques which are being developed in the course of the project will be applicable to an evaluation of the effect of different interventions aimed at promoting empathetic attitudes. (RAE)

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FIELD TOPIC
Social Education

1988:5

Current Project:

TITLE OF PROJECT: PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS
IN CHILDREN WITH DEFICIENT
EMPATHY AND SYMPATHY

This project is based on the curricular goal whereby schools are to endeavour to give pupils capacity for penetrating and understanding other people's conditions and a determination also to bear other people's best interests in mind in their actions.

To develop pupils in this respect, knowledge is needed, for example, concerning factors capable of inhibiting a child's capacity for empathy and sympathy.

Factors of this kind are being investigated in a number of sub-studies under the project.

The survey population comprises children at the intermediate level of compulsory school.

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What is it that induces children to act with other people's best interests in mind, and how can schools promote this kind of attitude? Behavioural research in recent years has shown an increasing tendency to focus on questions of this kind. Naturally enough, a great deal of this research interest has been concentrated on trying to understand inward processes in the child which may influence its actions towards others. Studies have been made of children's ability to understand other people's needs and feelings, of children's personalised ways of interpreting social situations and of their emotional reactions to other people's discomfort.

A rudimentary form of empathy can be observed during the very first year of life. This develops more and more, with a growing capacity for social understanding. The child learns to understand the emotional implications of different situations and in this way finds it easier to appreciate the position of others.

Individual differences in children's tendency to feel sympathy are to some extent due to differences of cognitive ability; some children are better than others at interpreting emotive expressions and at understanding what being in the other person's position is like. But the ways in which children react to other people's emotional experiences also reflect their personal structure and dynamics. For example, a highly developed capacity for empathy and social understanding is no guarantee of the child feeling sympathy for others. Cognitive skills can be put to both positive and negative use. Understanding of other people's position opens the way to positive action, but the same understanding can also be applied to manipulating or harming others.

What, then, are the personality-related factors influencing the readiness of the individual to feel sympathy for others? The purpose of this project is to chart a number of such factors. First of all, however, as a necessary foundation for the work in hand, a method has had to be developed for studying individual differences between empathetic reactions. The methods previously used in this research field are of two main kinds. One type of technique involves actively endeavouring to induce empathetic feelings in the children tested. For example, an emotionally charged film sequence is presented and afterwards the child is asked how he feels. The other type of technique involves using a standardised

questionnaire to get the child to describe how he usually reacts (or would react emotionally) to a number of situations described.

One drawback with these techniques is that they do not convey any picture of the mental processes occurring parallel to the emotional reactions. An important first step in our project, therefore, has been the development of a method making it possible to reflect the spontaneous thoughts provoked in the child's mind by other people's emotional experiences. Briefly, the method is based on the child, during an individual interview, being given descriptions of a number of situations which he could encounter in his everyday life and, in connection with each situation, being asked to say what he would have thought if the events described had actually happened. The child's reactions to other people's unpleasant experiences are classified in a number of categories which among other things indicate his tendency to (a) express sympathy (e.g. "I feel sorry for him"), (b) penetrate the other person's situation (e.g. "If it had happened to me I'd have been terribly upset"), (c) focus on solutions to the other person's problems (e.g. "I'd comfort her"), and (d) react selfishly (e.g. "I'm glad my parents aren't like that").

The test interview also includes a number of descriptions of situations in which pleasant things happen to other people. Children's spontaneous reactions to happy events are encoded into the following categories:

- (a) Thoughts indicating positive emotional involvement (e.g. "That was nice for him").
- (b) Thoughts indicating negative emotional involvement (e.g. "I bet she'll be stuck up because she won").
- (c) Wishes and compensatory thinking (e.g. "Bet you I win next time").
- (d) Indifference and trivialisation (e.g. "It was only a fluke, him winning").

One of the factors we believe to underline individual differences between empathetic reactions is the child's way of perceiving and interpreting social processes. Empathetic emotional reactions and spontaneous thoughts in empathy-arousing situations emanate from a personally tinged way of perceiving social processes. Children interpret and judge social situations on the basis of their values, norms, expectations and frames of reference. The following examples will serve to show how different

children perceive the same interactive sequence. Both children (10-year-olds) have seen the same video-recorded sequence and have been asked to re-tell what happened.

Child 1. "The big brother was going to paint a drawing for the competition, and then the little brother stood there punching a balloon, throwing it up in the air. Then he backed away... something was spoiled then. I don't know what it was... You couldn't see. And then he went to his mother and said that the drawing was spoiled and all that. And then the big brother was pretty upset, although the little brother said sorry. And the mother said it was a pity, but she'd seen a new competition with bigger prizes, and then he was ever so pleased."

Child 2. "Well, I suppose the big brother was terribly fond of the drawing. He almost boasted about it, didn't he? I suppose he thought it was awfully beautiful. He boasted about it, like, sort of - 'Now I'm it, kind of thing' - to his little brother. Yes, and then he went and spoiled it, didn't he? And then, like, I suppose he thought - 'Wonder if Mum'll be mad? Hope she will be, because then little brother will get a telling off' - that's almost what he wanted, but... alright, of course he thought it was a good thing, a new competition coming up, but he hadn't really expected it. I think he'd really wanted little brother to get a telling off."

Another factor which probably influences children's tendency to feel sympathy for others is the way they have learned to deal with situations in which something unpleasant happens to themselves. Children who have been forced to suppress their own feelings in situations of this kind can hardly be expected to react with sympathy when somebody else meets with a similar misfortune. The same can be said about children who have learned to trivialise problems which they come up against.

A third factor which probably does a great deal to influence the child's way of reacting to other people's experiences is its sense of belonging together with others. During an introductory phase of the project we studied the way in which ten- and eleven-year-olds themselves explained why they were not emotionally affected by other people's unpleasant experiences. We found that the children with the least tendency to react

with emotional empathy tended to explain their mode of reaction by drawing a clear distinction between their own business and other people's. A hard and fast boundary of this kind between oneself and others can in turn be an effect of the way in which the child feels it is met by others.

Finally, empathy-arousing situations always involve balancing between selfish interests and other people's interests. Confronted with unpleasant or pleasant things happening to other people, one can feel relatively fortunate or unfortunate. Constructive empathy probably requires a capacity for controlling selfish impulses and relative freedom from inward insecurity and dissatisfaction, which can otherwise pre-empt one's attention.

Sympathy and empathy are charged with positive values and are generally presumed to be factors conducive to positive social behaviour. Children who can share other people's happiness are presumed to feel motivated for acting in a way which gives happiness and satisfaction to others. Similarly, children feeling empathetic displeasure when others are in difficulty are presumed to be motivated for helping others. Extensive research in this field has showed, however, that reality is more complicated. This makes it natural for the project also to focus on and try to explain the relationship between empathetic attitudes and behavioural variables.

The development of empathy, sympathy and consideration for others ranks as an important ingredient of social education in schools. To get across to children with deficient empathy and sympathy, one needs to know about their psychological mechanisms. The overriding purpose of this project is to contribute that kind of knowledge. The work of the project, however, will also entail a development of methods. The techniques which are being developed in the course of the project will be applicable to an evaluation of the effect of different interventions aimed at promoting empathetic attitudes. A final report on the research will be presented in 1990.

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